

# Business plan writer no expert

Entrepreneurial fame and fortune may begin with a brilliant idea scribbled on a restaurant napkin. The next step, however, usually requires financing based on articulate business planning.

If you've never written a business plan, there's a program that may help you get your feet wet.

Business Plan Expert is a simple, step-by-step program that requires virtually no computer expertise or business training. It can acquaint you with business plan basics, but — because it ignores financial projections — it can't be regarded as a complete business plan program.

And, at \$195, it represents a very expensive introduction to basic business planning.

Building a business plan with this program is a three-step process, and I found fault with it right from the beginning:

■ First, you learn about strategic thinking by reviewing on-screen tutorials. Unfortunately, these tutorials are just screens of text that you page through. They are keyed to the sections of the



Hillel Segal

main program, but they are only accessible outside of it. There is no provision for creating a printout of the various tutorial sections. Also, you are limited to reading in a forward direction only. On several occasions when I tried to page backwards I was rudely dumped back to the DOS prompt.

■ Second, you are prompted to interactively answer numerous questions about your planned business. You can define up to four products and markets, draft a corporate mission statement, give sketches of key personnel, describe market strategies, and touch on internal and external risk factors. Unfortunately, you are allocated a very limited amount of space for answering each question.

■ Third, you enter into a review and modification cycle. Based on

your previous responses, the program automatically prints a Business Strategy Profile. The idea is that the Profile should then be reviewed by outside advisers and — since it's "computerized" — easily updated.

Editing with Business Plan Expert, however, is time-consuming. To make any edits, you're forced to page from beginning to end of each section in search of particular dialogue boxes. And, again, you're limited to forward travel.

Different versions of business plans can be saved independently. But there's no way to assemble a new version by cutting and pasting from previous ones.

If you faithfully answer the questions in each section, you will acquire a certain planning discipline. But if you rely solely on this program to launch your emerging business you'll never face one fundamental area: financial planning.

The publisher suggests you use Business Plan Expert in tandem with a spreadsheet program, but the program offers no help in building financials or in tying

them to the text of the Business Strategy Profile.

The tutorials and accompanying literature suggest that you could take the profile to a venture capitalist. But because there are no numbers to back up the text, the final product is, at best, a "talking tool" between an entrepreneur and his or her initial advisers.

■ The Bottom Line: I found this \$195 program to be much too expensive for what it offers. The first-time entrepreneur would be better off spending \$20 or less on a good book about business plans.

The data entry screens are confusing and difficult to edit. Since you can only generate a report on your printer, you are stuck with the same format and order.

Business Plan Expert is published by Expert Technologies Corp., 3618 Burlington, Houston, 77006; (713) 526-0909.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars, and books designed to enhance business productivity.